

I highly commend *Knowledge of God*. While I am, no doubt, inclined to side with Plantinga in the end, both Plantinga and Tooley do an amazing job. The arguments they both lay out are philosophically rich, robust, and truly seminal. The main shortcoming of the book, as I see it, is a shortcoming of these sorts of debates in general. While the arguments levelled in this book are of a high quality and are extremely useful, the nature of the debate is such that it spans broad, established disciplines with their own worlds of literature. In debating the epistemic status of theistic belief, Plantinga and Tooley occasionally make highly contested claims about morality, theology, the nature of logic, epistemology, the philosophy of mind, etc. – for example, regarding Plantinga’s second objection to naturalism in his opening statement, Tooley notes ‘If [Plantinga] is right, then virtually all of philosophy of mind of the past half-century or so has been radically off-track.’ – and that may be the way it has to be; however, it is, nevertheless, occasionally frustrating and dissatisfying (p. 190). Regardless, *Knowledge of God* is an excellent book, which I would wholeheartedly recommend to anyone with the interest and technical familiarity and certainly to any graduate students studying philosophy of religion.

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**Robert A. Hinde. *Why Gods Persist: A Scientific Approach to Religion* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2010.**

Across its history, Christianity and other religions have demonstrated a consistent capacity to respond to ongoing criticism. Those critics, whether historical or contemporary, have used various tactics to try to undermine religion. Despite the tenacity and ingenuity of these criticisms, especially those invested in the modern sciences, a once-and-for-all challenge to religion is unforthcoming. Responding to this fact, Robert A. Hinde emphasises that ‘something more than a sledgehammer, however skilfully it is wielded, is needed. We need to seek a scientific understanding of religion’s extraordinary resilience’ (p. viii). The aim of this book is, then, to provide that understanding of religion, thereby enabling, if only in part, the formation of a ‘a happier world’ (p. ix).

Such programmatic statements are familiar, at least since the early Enlightenment. Identifying the best ways to understanding religion, however, is a more difficult issue. At the heart of many science and religion debates is a methodological problem: what are the most effective and legitimate means of structuring those debates? For some writers, the obvious answer is to appeal to the physical and human sciences. Since those sciences enjoy a considerable cognitive and cultural authority, appealing to them can make good sense.

A problem with such naturalistic approaches is, however, that they can tend to load the dice. *Why Gods Persist* is a good example of the tensions generated by naturalistic approach. Its author, Robert A. Hinde, investigates the ubiquity of religious beliefs by appealing to naturalistic methodologies that, implicitly or not, deny the truth of their transcendental claims. The 'scientific approach to religion' he advocates is, therefore, hardly a neutral or impartial approach: it sets up religion as an ultimately anomalous phenomena, devoid of evidentiary or rational warrant, whose origins and longevity can, then, only be the result of social entrenchment, psychological utility, or other such mundane origins. The result is an interesting and useful survey of contemporary naturalistic theories of religion, but one unlikely to persuade those religious persons whose beliefs it is concerned with.

The title of *Why Gods Persist* indicates the attitude its author takes towards religion. The guiding concern of the book is the origin and ubiquity of religious belief in human societies, focusing especially upon Christianity. Hinde appeals mainly to the biological and human sciences to examine our adherence to, and the distribution and value of, religion. Two particular facts about the opening chapter of the book are worth noting: firstly, the first two authors it cites are Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, and second, Hinde consistently refers to the value and significance of religion in the past tense. These two facts indicate the partisan approach that Hinde employs and will likely determine its readers' judgement of the persuasiveness of his book.

*Why Gods Persist* takes as axiomatic the fact that Christianity is intellectually confused, incompatible with both science and common sense. This axiom then provides the motivation for the book's titular concern: how has such a manifestly false system of beliefs persisted? Dawkins and Dennett, writes Hinde, 'have pointed out that the basic beliefs of Christian doctrine, taken literally, are simply unacceptable to most twentieth-century minds', due both to 'inconsistencies with

everyday common sense' and, more urgently, with 'modern scientific knowledge' (p. 4). But if Christianity does not have truth on its side, how can we account for its persistence and evident popularity?

Such remarks are, of course, meat and drink to the wide school of contemporary critics of religion. That broad church of naturalists – forgive the pun – includes evolutionary psychologists, humanists, 'new atheists', and more besides. If one shares their conviction that religion is an intellectually and morally bankrupt vestige of earlier, irrational periods of history, Hinde's account will be very satisfying. But if one is not already persuaded that religion simply reflects 'principles of human functioning that operate also in non-religious contexts' (p. 7), then Hinde's account will seem question-begging and presumptive. For many persons, religious beliefs are neither 'simply unacceptable' nor incompatible with their common sense: the quotidian experience of many persons – and not just 'god-intoxicated' figures like Spinoza or William Paley – discloses a world marked by divine providence or transcendental depth.

Hinde's insistence that religion is a naturalistic psychosocial phenomenon obscures the possibility, attested to by many intelligent persons, that one can enjoy religious belief within a deeply human context, one marked by nuanced understandings of the psychological, affective, and social aspects of religious belief (for instance, the work of John Cottingham over the last decade or so). I am therefore sceptical of the claim, made by Dawkins amongst others, that Hinde manifests a more conciliatory approach to religion than many other naturalists. Certainly this book is happily free of the polemic of other books, but its explicit commitment to a naturalistic interpretation of religion means that, in the end, any conciliation is simply a companion to eventual rejection. Indeed, late into the book, Hinde states his anticipation of 'a world that does not involve conflict arising from disparate beliefs in improbable entities' (p. 218). That is not the language of conciliation and Hinde's aetiological approach to the origins and development of religion is, as with David Hume and August Comte, expected to end in the natural dissolution of religion.

Central to Hinde's aetiological approach is a functional conception of religion. A corollary of this is that religion clearly cannot be what religious persons take it to be. Early on in the book, Hinde remarks that there are two possible approaches to an understanding of religion. 'Either religious beliefs ... refer to some transcendental reality', or they are 'products of

human nature in interaction with society and with the world' (p. 7). This duality is, I think, misleading. It is quite intelligible to suggest that religion could be both an engagement, by certain receptive persons, with a transcendental reality, where this engagement is affected by human biology in social and historical context. The fifth-century Christian mystic Denys, for instance, emphasised that religious belief is structured by our perceptual, cognitive, and linguistic capacities, as well as by our wider social and historical context. Hinde's claim that *either* religion is what it claims to be – communion with transcendental realities – *or* that it is a psychosocial phenomenon polarises the discussion. And since he has already rejected the transcendental interpretation, the only interpretation left is the naturalistic approach, one featuring, amongst other things, an 'evolutionary history of gods' (p. 65) and, into the future, 'a cost/benefit analysis of the impact of Christianity' (p. 251).

There is much to learn from this book. It provides a useful survey of contemporary naturalistic approaches to religious belief and practice and the concise length of the chapters, plus the handy summaries, should earn it a place on philosophy of religion reading lists. Its scholarly and pedagogical utility aside, though, Hinde will not succeed in persuading religious persons of the falsity and disutility of their beliefs. Certainly one would not be persuaded of his conclusion that 'ultimately we must face the fact that it is up to us, that we cannot hope for help from above' (p. 262). Anyone seeking an introduction to contemporary naturalistic theories of religion will find this an excellent resource; however, only those already firmly in the naturalistic camp will find it persuasive.

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**Aku Visala, *Naturalism, Theism and the Cognitive Study of Religion: Religion Explained?*, Ashgate, 2011.**

Theists and atheists continue to debate the cognitive status of religious belief. Is theism justified in the light of theories that explain religious beliefs as the result of natural cognitive capacities? This question has been around at least since William James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James believed that religious experiences (especially